

## ***Paeonia mascula* (L.) Mill.**

## **Peony**

Neophyte

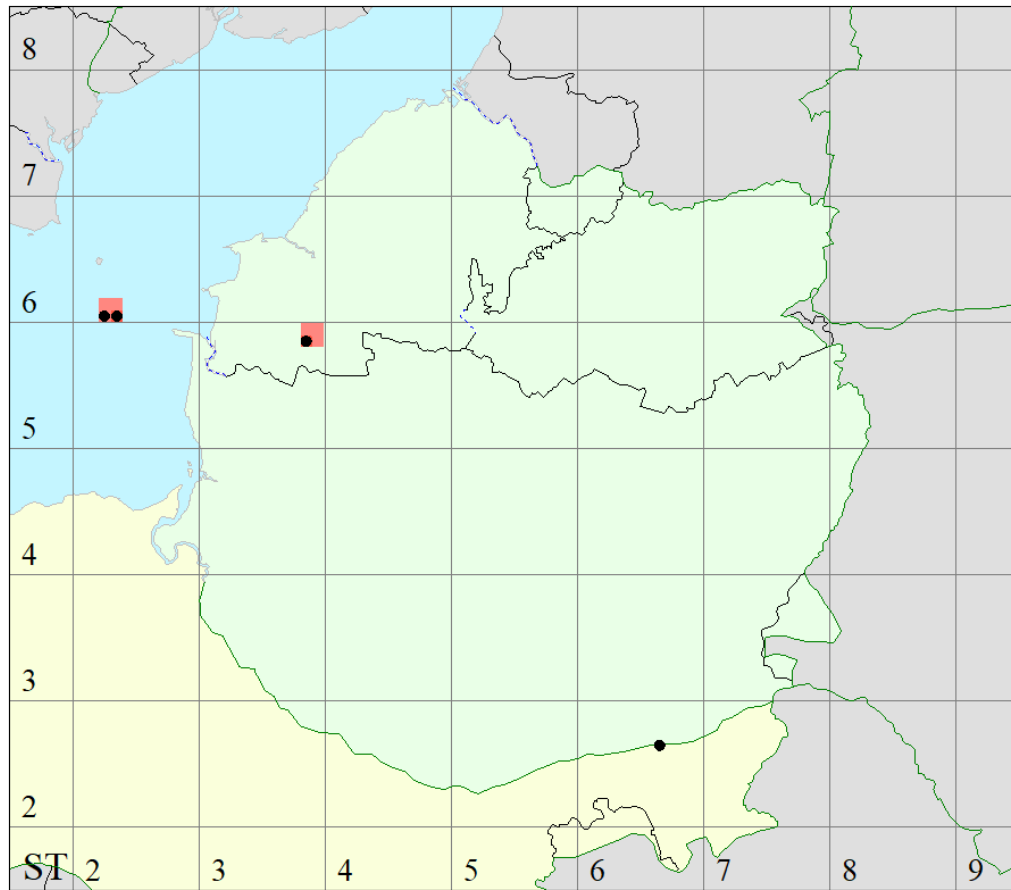
VC5 Absent; VC6 Rare

A perennial herb found naturalised on limestone cliffs and in woodland, also on a road verge. First discovered on Steep Holm (VC6) in 1803 by Francis Bowcher Wright of Hinton Blewett, who was told by local fisherman that the plant had been there during living memory, for about sixty or seventy years. It is considered likely that *Paeonia mascula* was introduced and cultivated by Mediaeval monks on the island, for medicinal properties of the roots. By 1803 it was naturalised on steep limestone cliffs at the east end of the island, soon becoming a tourist attraction. The population became diminished by collecting: Murray (1896) reported it to be “now very scarce”. By 1969 the plants were badly shaded by sycamores and had become infected with mildew, so one was transplanted to drier ground by the visitor centre (Marren, 1999); further plants were added to the captive collection, whilst the wild colony dwindled. In 2009 John Martin recorded several plants in the wire cages near the barracks, but the last record at that site was in 2014, when seen by Clive Lovatt. In that year there were also two plants in a cage by the priory, although they were suffering from Peony Wilt. In 2022 Steve Parker recorded a single plant in flower in a cage at the priory site.

*Paeonia mascula* was planted in the garden of The Caves at Banwell, allegedly by the Bishop of Bath and Wells, between 1824 and 1835 (Taylor, 1990; Marren, 1999). The species was reported by Green *et al.* (2000) to have been established in woodland there since 1979. In 1989 Ian Taylor recorded 26 plants thoroughly naturalised in woods to the east of The Caves, and four plants which had been transplanted from vulnerable locations into the garden. The last record for this site was in 2004, when Alastair Stevenson was shown a single plant by the owner. In 2015 Helena Crouch and Fred Rumsey discovered three small plants of this species growing on the south verge of the A303 near Maperton. (The lane south of and parallel to the A303 is the VC boundary here). In 2020, nine plants were found at this site, four with fruits. The origin of these plants is unknown, seeds presumably having arrived via a passing vehicle, but they are now the only known plants naturalised in Somerset. *Paeonia mascula* has been variously recorded as naturalised elsewhere, sometimes in error for other species.

### **VC6**

|                |      |            |      |          |  |
|----------------|------|------------|------|----------|--|
| Steep Holm     | SSSI | ST22846060 | 2014 | CML      | In metal cage, west of barracks            |
| Steep Holm     | SSSI | ST23146066 | 2021 | SJP      | 1 plant in cage, very poor condition       |
| Steep Holm     | SSSI | ST232605   | 2022 | SJP      | 1 large plant with 1 flower on Priory site |
| Banwell        |      | ST384587   | 2004 | AS       | 1 plant shown to AS by owner [NB PRIVATE]  |
| Maperton Ridge |      | ST66572692 | 2020 | HJC, FJR | 3 plants, 2 in fruit, on S verge of A303   |
| Maperton Ridge |      | ST66592693 | 2020 | HJC, FJR | 1 seedling on S verge of A303              |
| Maperton Ridge |      | ST66642693 | 2020 | HJC, FJR | 1 small plant on S verge of A303           |
| Maperton Ridge |      | ST66652693 | 2020 | HJC, FJR | 1 small plant on S verge of A303           |
| Maperton Ridge |      | ST66672693 | 2020 | HJC, FJR | 1 small plant on S verge of A303           |
| Maperton Ridge |      | ST66682693 | 2020 | HJC, FJR | 2 plants in fruit on S verge of A303       |



Distribution of *Paeonia mascula* in North Somerset (VC6), mapped using MapMate.  
 Black dots are post-2000 records; red squares are 1987-1999



*Paeonia mascula* on Steep Holm (2022). Photo: SJP